

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
NORTHERN DIVISION

CORIELLE JOHNSON,

Plaintiff,

Case No. 2:12-cv-429

v.

Honorable Gordon J. Quist

JIM ALEXANDER, et al.,

Defendants.

OPINION

This is a civil rights action brought by a state prisoner pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983. The Court has granted Plaintiff leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. Under the Prison Litigation Reform Act, PUB. L. NO. 104-134, 110 STAT. 1321 (1996), the Court is required to dismiss any prisoner action brought under federal law if the complaint is frivolous, malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2), 1915A; 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). The Court must read Plaintiff's *pro se* complaint indulgently, *see Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972), and accept Plaintiff's allegations as true, unless they are clearly irrational or wholly incredible. *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25, 33 (1992). Applying these standards, the Court will dismiss Plaintiff's complaint for failure to state a claim against Defendants Glen Caron, Jim Alexander and Robert Napels. The Court will serve the complaint against Defendants Unknown Nadeau, Unknown Marshall, Unknown Viitala, and Unknown LaRock.

Discussion

I. Factual allegations

Plaintiff Corielle Johnson, a state prisoner currently confined at the Baraga Maximum Correctional Facility (AMF), filed this prisoner civil rights action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 against Defendants Deputy Warden Jim Alexander, Corrections Officer Unknown Nadeau, Assistant Resident Unit Supervisor Unknown Marshall, Assistant Resident Unit Supervisor Unknown Viitala, Grievance Coordinator Glen Caron, Warden Robert Napels, and Assistant Unit Supervisor Unknown LaRock. During the pertinent time period, Plaintiff was confined at the Marquette Branch Prison (MBP) and Defendants were employed at MBP.

Plaintiff alleges that when he arrived at MBP in February of 2012, he filed a lawsuit against 40 MDOC employees from MBP, AMF, and Ionia Max. Shortly thereafter, Plaintiff began to receive comments and threats from staff. On April 24, while Plaintiff was on suicide watch, he was found in his cell hanging from the sprinkler pole by Corrections Officer Davis, who hit the panic button. Sergeant Hoult arrived and sprayed him with a whole container of chemical agent before extracting him from the cell. Plaintiff was taken from the pole and slammed to the ground, banging his head. Plaintiff was then kicked, stomped and dragged from his cell.

Plaintiff subsequently filed grievances and contacted his Ombudsman. On October 12, 2012, Plaintiff returned from seeing his psychologist to find his cell destroyed and his ear phones and papers missing. Other prisoners told Plaintiff that Defendants Marshall, Viitala, and LaRock were responsible for destroying his cell and that they had been overheard saying that Plaintiff wrote too many grievances. On October 15, 2012, Defendants Marshall and Viitala admitted that they had flipped Plaintiff's files over "in jest." On October 18, 2012, Plaintiff asked Defendant Nadeau about his ear phones and missing papers. Defendant Nadeau responded, "Yeah I was in there, you wanna

run your mouth, lying on your grievances, you know how it goes.” On October 18, 2012, Plaintiff sent grievances on Defendants Marshall, Viitala, and Nadeau. On October 19, 2012, Defendants Caron and Alexander solicited Defendant Napels and had Plaintiff placed on modified access to the grievance procedure.

Plaintiff claims that Defendants violated his First Amendment rights to be free from retaliation and to have access to the courts. Plaintiff also claims that Defendants engaged in a conspiracy. Plaintiff seeks damages.

II. Failure to state a claim

A complaint may be dismissed for failure to state a claim if “‘it fails to give the defendant fair notice of what the . . . claim is and the grounds upon which it rests.’” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007) (quoting *Conley v. Gibson*, 355 U.S. 41, 45-46 (1957)). While a complaint need not contain detailed factual allegations, a plaintiff’s allegations must include more than labels and conclusions. *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555; *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (“Threadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice.”). The court must determine whether the complaint contains “enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.” *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570. “A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679. Although the plausibility standard is not equivalent to a “‘probability requirement,’ . . . it asks for more than a sheer possibility that a defendant has acted unlawfully.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678 (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556). “[W]here the well-pleaded facts do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of misconduct, the complaint has alleged – but it has not ‘show[n]’ – that the pleader is entitled to relief.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679 (quoting FED. R. CIV. P. 8(a)(2)); *see also*

Hill v. Lappin, 630 F.3d 468, 470-71 (6th Cir. 2010) (holding that the *Twombly/Iqbal* plausibility standard applies to dismissals of prisoner cases on initial review under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915A(b)(1) and 1915(e)(2)(B)(i)).

To state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege the violation of a right secured by the federal Constitution or laws and must show that the deprivation was committed by a person acting under color of state law. *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988); *Street v. Corr. Corp. of Am.*, 102 F.3d 810, 814 (6th Cir. 1996). Because § 1983 is a method for vindicating federal rights, not a source of substantive rights itself, the first step in an action under § 1983 is to identify the specific constitutional right allegedly infringed. *Albright v. Oliver*, 510 U.S. 266, 271 (1994).

Plaintiff claims that Defendants Caron, Alexander and Napels retaliated against him for his use of the grievance procedure by having him placed on modified access. Retaliation based upon a prisoner's exercise of his or her constitutional rights violates the Constitution. *See Thaddeus-X v. Blatter*, 175 F.3d 378, 394 (6th Cir. 1999) (en banc). In order to set forth a First Amendment retaliation claim, a plaintiff must establish that: (1) he was engaged in protected conduct; (2) an adverse action was taken against him that would deter a person of ordinary firmness from engaging in that conduct; and (3) the adverse action was motivated, at least in part, by the protected conduct. *Thaddeus-X*, 175 F.3d at 394. Moreover, a plaintiff must be able to prove that the exercise of the protected right was a substantial or motivating factor in the defendant's alleged retaliatory conduct. *See Smith v. Campbell*, 250 F.3d 1032, 1037 (6th Cir. 2001) (citing *Mount Healthy City Sch. Dist. Bd. of Educ. v. Doyle*, 429 U.S. 274, 287 (1977)).

The Sixth Circuit repeatedly has held that placement on modified access does not constitute an adverse action for purposes of a retaliation claim. *See, e.g., Jackson v. Madery*, 158 F. App'x 656, 660 (6th Cir. 2005) (per curiam); *Walker v. Mich. Dep't of Corr.*, 128 F. App'x 441,

446 (6th Cir. 2005). Therefore, Plaintiff's retaliation claims against Defendants Caron, Alexander and Napels are properly dismissed. However, it appears that Plaintiff's retaliation claims against Defendants Nadeau, Marshall, Viitala, and LaRock are non-frivolous and may not be dismissed on initial review.

Plaintiff claims that Defendants Nadeau, Marshall, Viitala, and LaRock violated his right of access to the courts when they removed papers from his cell. In *Bounds v. Smith*, 430 U.S. 817 (1977), the Supreme Court recognized a prisoner's fundamental right of access to the courts. While the right of access to the courts does not allow a State to prevent an inmate from bringing a grievance to court, it also does not require the State to enable a prisoner to discover grievances or litigate effectively. *Lewis v. Casey*, 518 U.S. 343 (1996). Thus, *Bounds* did not create an abstract, free-standing right to a law library, litigation tools, or legal assistance. *Id.* at 351 (1996). Further, the right may be limited by legitimate penological goals, such as maintaining security and preventing fire or sanitation hazards. See *Acord v. Brown*, No. 91-1865, 1992 WL 58975 (6th Cir. March 26, 1992); *Hadix v. Johnson*, No. 86-1701, 1988 WL 24204 (6th Cir. March 17, 1988); *Wagner v. Rees*, No. 85-5637, 1985 WL 14025 (6th Cir. Nov. 8, 1985).

To state a claim, an inmate must show that any misconduct by Defendants caused actual injury in his pursuit of a legal claim. *Lewis*, 518 U.S. at 351; *Talley-Bey*, 168 F.3d at 886; *Kensu v. Haigh*, 87 F.3d 172, 175 (6th Cir. 1996); *Pilgrim v. Littlefield*, 92 F.3d 413, 416 (6th Cir. 1996); *Walker v. Mintzes*, 771 F.2d 920, 932 (6th Cir. 1985). An inmate must make a specific claim that he was adversely affected or that the litigation was prejudiced. *Vandiver v. Niemi*, No. 94-1642, 1994 WL 677685, at *1 (6th Cir. Dec. 2, 1994). Particularly, an inmate cannot show injury when he still has access to his legal materials by request, *Kensu*, 87 F.3d at 175, when he fails to state how he is unable to replicate the confiscated documents, *Vandiver*, 1994 WL 677685, at *1, or when he

could have received the material by complying with the limits on property, e.g., where he had the opportunity to select the items that he wanted to keep in his cell, or when he had an opportunity to purchase a new footlocker that could hold the property. *Carlton v. Fassbender*, No. 93-1116, 1993 WL 241459, at *2 (6th Cir. July 1, 1993).

In this case, Plaintiff's claim of injury is entirely conclusory. In order to succeed on this claim, Plaintiff must demonstrate actual injury to pending or contemplated litigation. *Dellis v. Corrections Corp. of America*, 257 F.3d 508, 511 (6th Cir. 2001)(citing *Lewis v. Casey*, 518 U.S. 343, 351 (1996)). The Supreme Court has strictly limited the types of cases for which there may be an actual injury:

Bounds does not guarantee inmates the wherewithal to transform themselves into litigating engines capable of filing everything from shareholder derivative actions to slip-and-fall claims. The tools it requires to be provided are those that the inmates need in order to attack their sentences, directly or collaterally, and in order to challenge the conditions of their confinement. Impairment of any other litigating capacity is simply one of the incidental (and perfectly constitutional) consequences of conviction and incarceration.

Lewis, 518 U.S. at 355. "Thus, a prisoner's right to access the courts extends to direct appeals, habeas corpus applications, and civil rights claims only." *Thaddeus-X v. Blatter*, 175 F.3d 378, 391 (6th Cir. 1999) (en banc). Moreover, the underlying action must have asserted a non-frivolous claim. *Lewis*, 518 U.S. at 353; accord *Hadix v. Johnson*, 182 F.3d 400, 405 (6th Cir. 1999) (*Lewis* changed actual injury to include requirement that action be non-frivolous).

Further, the Supreme Court squarely has held that "the underlying cause of action . . . is an element that must be described in the complaint, just as much as allegations must describe the official acts frustrating the litigation." *Christopher v. Harbury*, 536 U.S. 403, 415 (2002) (citing *Lewis*, 518 U.S. at 353 & n.3). The *Christopher* Court held that, "[l]ike any other element of an access claim, the underlying cause of action and its lost remedy must be addressed by allegations

in the complaint sufficient to give fair notice to a defendant.” *Christopher*, 536 U.S. at 416. Because Plaintiff has failed to allege the requisite injury for an access to courts claim, these claims are properly dismissed.

Finally, Plaintiff makes a conclusory assertion that Defendants Caron, Alexander and Napel conspired to cover up their subordinates’ misconduct when they placed him on modified access to the grievance procedure. To state a claim for conspiracy, a plaintiff must plead with particularity, as vague and conclusory allegations unsupported by material facts are insufficient. *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 565 (recognizing that allegations of conspiracy must be supported by allegations of fact that support a “plausible suggestion of conspiracy,” not merely a “possible” one); *Fieger v. Cox*, 524 F.3d 770, 776 (6th Cir. 2008); *Spadafore v. Gardner*, 330 F.3d 849, 854 (6th Cir. 2003); *Gutierrez v. Lynch*, 826 F.2d 1534, 1538 (6th Cir. 1987); *Smith v. Rose*, 760 F.2d 102, 106 (6th Cir. 1985); *Pukyrys v. Olson*, No. 95-1778, 1996 WL 636140, at *1 (6th Cir. Oct. 30, 1996). A plaintiff’s allegations must show (1) the existence or execution of the claimed conspiracy, (2) overt acts relating to the promotion of the conspiracy, (3) a link between the alleged conspirators, and (4) an agreement by the conspirators to commit an act depriving plaintiff of a federal right. *Lepley v. Dresser*, 681 F. Supp. 418, 422 (W.D. Mich. 1988). “[V]ague allegations of a wide-ranging conspiracy are wholly conclusory and are, therefore, insufficient to state a claim.” *Hartsfield v. Mayer*, No. 95-1411, 1996 WL 43541, at *3 (6th Cir. Feb. 1, 1996). A simple allegation that defendants conspired to cover up wrongful actions is too conclusory and too speculative to state a claim of conspiracy. *Birrell v. Michigan*, No. 94-2456, 1995 WL 355662, at *2 (6th Cir. June 13, 1995). Plaintiff’s allegations of conspiracy are conclusory and speculative. Therefore, the court will dismiss Plaintiff’s conspiracy claims.

Conclusion

Having conducted the review required by the Prison Litigation Reform Act, the Court determines that Plaintiff's claims against Defendants Caron, Alexander and Napels will be dismissed for failure to state a claim pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b), and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). In addition, the court will dismiss Plaintiff's access to courts claims against all Defendants on the same grounds. The Court will serve the complaint against Defendants Nadeau, Marshall, Viitala, and LaRock solely with regard to Plaintiff's retaliation claims.

An Order consistent with this Opinion will be entered.

Dated: March 8, 2013

/s/ Gordon J. Quist
GORDON J. QUIST
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE